

March 6, 2011

“Sludge: Lent as Detox”

Rev. J. Daniel Lewis

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Exodus 24:12-18 and Matthew 17:1-9
Transfiguration Year A

Sermon by J. Daniel Lewis
March 6, 2011, Claremont UMC

We heard four scripture readings that each refer to the Transfiguration, indicating for us that today is Transfiguration Sunday. Here is part of the reason this word makes it into our church tradition in 2011.

From the Exodus story, Moses was our main character. He led his people out of slavery in Egypt into the great wilderness where they'd wandered for some years. The people stuck with Moses, even though you could say that their behavior had been less than perfect. They stopped for a while at the foot of Mount Sinai while Moses climbed up the mountain to speak with God. While up there, the "glory of God settled on the mountain" having an everlasting effect on him.

When we fast forward to the end of the wilderness trip, we learn of Moses atop another mountain from which he showed his people the promise land, but told them that he could not cross over there with them. After leaving them with a blessing, they parted ways. Moses kept going up to Mount Nebo where he died.

A different story about the character Elijah is also important to round out our understanding today. Elijah was a great prophet, royal consultant, and mentor to Elisha. After many years of service, Elijah and Elisha stepped away from the others for a moment, during which Elijah was swept into the sky by a (chariot and horses of fire) and Elisha was left holding Elijah's cloak. (2 Kings 2) Knowing these things about Moses and Elijah is important for what we just heard read from the Gospel of Matthew and the book of 2nd Peter.

In today's Matthew story, Jesus took several of his close disciples with him up a high mountain. While there, the disciples were surprised by dazzling light and the appearance of Moses and Elijah alongside Jesus. Moses and Elijah were long since deceased, but their importance well known in Jewish history. They were each representatives of God – Moses represented God through the laws, and Elijah represented God for the prophets. The disciples with Jesus struggled constantly in their understanding of him as the Messiah, so this image of him with Moses and Elijah, along with the voice of God claiming him, was powerful in helping their perception of who Jesus was. This image helped give Jesus the authority as the NEW Moses, and the NEW Elijah. He was the merging authority of the Law AND the Prophets. This event and the change in Jesus' appearance AND the disciples perception of him is what we refer to as The Transfiguration.

With today being Transfiguration Sunday in our church calendar, it is also the last Sunday of the season of Epiphany and continues to expand OUR awareness of Jesus as the Messiah.

And as Jesus came down from that mountain top with his disciples, we, too, are at a turning point in our Christian calendar when we begin our journey of recalling those days that led to the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus.

THAT is a lot of background! But I don't want to presume that everyone remembers, or ever learned, all of same information.

If you hadn't heard yet, I joined 500 other people last weekend at a conference in Northern California called Wisdom 2.0. It wasn't the normal sort of clergy conference. I was one of three United Methodist ministers, the other two were my friends. Everyone else was a mixture from technology, spirituality, medical and publishing fields. The conference was three-days of dialogue between technology giants and spiritual-gurus on the topic of "Technology and Mindfulness." I'm still slowly sorting through my (hand-written) notes and finding those bits of information that promise to be helpful to us at Claremont United Methodist Church.

Mindfulness, as described by David Rock, author of the book "Your Brain at Work," is not a concept owned by Buddhism. To the contrary, he argued that surrendering the expertise of mindfulness to just meditation practitioners, or Buddhists, or to ANY religion for that matter, is very unfortunate. He shared statistic after statistic supporting how mindfulness, meditation, prayer, or quiet-time improves learning and behavior all areas of living including education. In other words, just a few minutes of mindfulness each day proves to make individuals stronger and healthier – emotionally, mentally, spiritually, professionally, and last but not least, physically.

Enjoy this little tidbit of information: I had heard that the founder of Methodism, John Wesley used to pray every morning for two hours. When some complained that they were too busy to pray for two hours a day. Wesley replied that he was too busy NOT to pray for two hours a day.

Another of the speakers from the conference was Meng Tan, who is the Head of Personal Growth at a company called Google. I was amazed at the number of young people in the technology field who were very clear on their purpose to help humanity in their lifetimes. One of Meng's personal goals is to create world peace in his lifetime. He says he works to do this by teaching inner-peace to the engineers at Google and in doing so, that effects peace in their work-place. That, he claims, along with the influence of Google around the world, could have some far reaching implications.

Meng, like many other "personal enrichment" directors at large tech-companies, work with people addicted to adrenaline and the never-ending quest for more information. These companies find that when they offer classes on self-care, they don't attract the expected 2 or 3 people. Instead, the classes generally attract 2-3 hundred employees.

Their engineers, not unlike the rest of humanity, are longing for INTERNAL balance, even while they easily have the entire external world at their fingertips.

Meng laughs that the task of teaching mindfulness to engineers sounds daunting. He makes the important point that his lessons on mindfulness practice must be translated into vocabulary that engineers will understand, otherwise, the lesson is lost on closed ears. For that reason, his class that might teach "deep awareness of emotion" is instead titled "Developing a 'higher resolution perception' of the emotion process."

And for that same reason, for us, the vocabulary of Transfiguration and Lent may be alternatively titled: "Sludge: Lent as Detox."

Let me share a quick story of transfiguration that includes a friend of mine from Colorado. Several years ago, my friend weighed several hundred pounds. I don't know how many pounds exactly, but it was enough that he had to sleep upright in a chair. With the help of modern medicine, he was able to lose most of the weight and is now somewhere around a comfortable, but tall 220 pounds. I will never forget these words he told me after his physical change, "Dan, I forgot what it felt like to really move."

What words would WE use when filling in the blank at the end of that sentence?

"I forgot what it felt like..."

"I forgot what it felt like to feel good."

"I forgot what it felt like to be happy."

"I forgot what it felt like to be motivated."

"I forgot what it felt like to not worry."

Our culture is drunk with those things that are designed to help us forget what it feels like to feel. Much of our daily consumption of food, information, technology, and communication is not nourishment, it's anesthesia. For many of you, like myself, driving through to get another double-shot of adrenaline cannot make us any faster because our speedometers, WHATEVER they're now measuring, are maxed out.

BEING AWARE - is the opposite of anesthesia.

This Wednesday is Ash Wednesday which begins our traditional season of Lent. I want to share something with you before Lent begins. Our Protestant tradition, as we practice here, teaches that Lent is not primarily penitent. What I mean by that for instance, is that increasing our piles of 'regrets' and 'I'm sorrys' is not movement toward something healthier, it's obsession over the things that are not right. We are far better motivated as human beings when focusing on something positive ahead of us.

After last weekend, I've considered the correlations that may go along with mindfulness and cleansing one's mind. The image that came to me was a popular one already well-known by nutritionists and vitamin shop fans. I've never done this, nor am I qualified to recommend anything, but I know that there are products, and special practices, which help one to cleanse their physical body from the build-up of sludge that coats their insides from the capillaries to the intestines.

There may be sludge in our guts. There's also sludge in our 'Noggins and sludge in our relationships with God. Thinking of cleansing myself, inside and out, is more inspiring to me than simply standing there and cursing the sludge.

Consider with me then, an image of Transfiguration that is YOUR body, mind, emotional, and spiritual cleansing. Consider with me then, that Lent is a time of preparation - preparing for the resurrection of Christ at Easter, and becoming mindful of the toxins of our normal consumption.

I don't know specifically what my detox plan will be for this Lent, but I plan on having one. Because I don't want to ever utter the words, "I forgot what it felt like to move" or "I forgot what it felt like to be close to God" or "I forgot what it felt like to ... (______)."

Walk with me, as we enter this NEW.....traditional season of feeling and awareness.